

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 MOSCOW 20175 01 OF 02 281703Z
ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 DHA-02 CU-02 SAJ-01 ACDA-07 CIAE-00
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AMEMBASSY BERLIN
USMISSION USBERLIN UNN
AMEMBASSY BUCHAREST
AMEMBASSY BUDAPEST
AMCONSUL LENINGRAD
AMCONSUL MUNICH
USMISSION NATO
AMEMBASSY PRAGUE
AMEMBASSY SOFIA
AMEMBASSY WARSAW
USIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 MOSCOW 20175

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR PINT CSCE SHUM SCUL UR US
SUBJECT: SOVIET BAPTISTS LOOK FORWARD TO HAVING "BROTHER CARTER"
IN THE WHITE HOUSE

REF: (A) MOSCOW 15361, (B) MOSCOW A-266

1. SUMMARY. DURING WIDE-RANGING DISCUSSION WITH THE
GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE ALL-UNION BAPTIST COUNCIL AND THE
PASTOR OF THE MOSCOW BAPTIST CHURCH ABOUT THE STATUS OF
BAPTISTS IN THE USSR, THE FOLLOWING POINTS EMERGED:
--THEY PREFER TO DEAL WITH THE AUTHORITIES BY TAKING A
LOW-KEY, BUSINESSLIKE APPROACH, BY OBEYING THE LAW, AND BY
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PAGE 02 MOSCOW 20175 01 OF 02 281703Z

INSISTING THAT THE AUTHORITIES OBEY IT, TOO.
--BUT BEING AWARE THAT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
BELIEVERS AND AUTHORITIES IS NOT AN EQUAL ONE, THEY
LOOK WITH HOPE TO THE BENEFICENT EFFECTS OF THE HELSINKI
FINAL ACT, AND--NOW--TO THE PROSPECT OF HAVING A "REAL
BAPTIST" IN THE WHITE HOUSE, AS FACTORS LIKELY TO

MODULATE SOVIET BEHAVIOR IN MATTERS OF RELIGION.
--THE "LEGAL" BAPTISTS MAINTAIN TIES WITH THE
"ILLEGAL" BAPTIST CONGREGATIONS AND SEEK TO HELP
RESOLVE THE LATTER'S DIFFICULTIES WITH THE AUTHORITIES.
END SUMMARY.

2. EMBOFF RECENTLY PAID A CALL ON GENERAL SECRETARY
OF THE ALL-UNION COUNCIL OF EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS-
BAPTISTS ALEKSEY MIKHAYLOVICH BYCHKOV AND REVEREND
MIKHAIL YAKOVLEVICH ZHIDKOV, PASTOR OF THE MOSCOW
BAPTIST CHURCH. THE CONVERSATION FOCUSED ON THE
CURRENT STATUS OF BAPTISTS IN THE USSR, INCLUDING THE
UNREGISTERED "ILLEGAL" BAPTIST CONGREGATIONS, BUT
RANGED BROADLY OVER THE GENERAL STATE OF RELATIONS
BETWEEN BELIEVERS AND THE AUTHORITIES.

3. RECENT TRIP TO U.S. BYCHKOV AND ZHIDKOV HAD
RETURNED RECENTLY FROM A TRIP TO THE U.S. AND WERE
ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE, ALTHOUGH BOTH HAD
BEEN THERE BEFORE. THEIR ITINERARY INCLUDED STOPS IN
WASHINGTON, ALEXANDRIA, NASHVILLE, AND SEVERAL OTHER
CITIES IN THE BAPTIST "BIBLE BELT" OF THE SOUTH. THEY
EXPRESSED APPRECIATION FOR THE HOSPITALITY THEY
RECEIVED AND RECALLED WITH AMUSEMENT ATTENDING A
BAPTIST SERVICE WHERE THE PASTOR DENOUNCED JIMMY CARTER
FROM THE PULPIT FOR HIS INTERVIEW PUBLISHED IN PLAYBOY.

4. ON THE CURRENT STATUS OF BAPTISTS IN USSR. ACCORDING
TO BYCHKOV AND ZHIDKOV (THE VIEWS PRESENTED HERE ARE
THROUGHOUT ATTRIBUTABLE TO BOTH), RELATIONS BETWEEN
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PAGE 03 MOSCOW 20175 01 OF 02 281703Z

BAPTISTS AND THE AUTHORITIES HAVE BEEN SLOWLY IMPROVING
DURING THE PAST TEN-YEAR PERIOD. THEY DESCRIBED THE
STATE COMMITTEE FOR RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS AS RELATIVELY
OPEN MINDED, WILLING TO CONSIDER REQUESTS, AND LIKELY
TO AGREE TO ACCEPTABLE SOLUTIONS IF APPROACHED IN A
QUIET AND BUSINESSLIKE WAY. IF COMPLICATIONS ARISE,
THEY ARE USUALLY CAUSED BY THE OVERZEALOUSNESS OF
LOCAL OFFICIALS, WHO TRY TO WHITTLE AWAY THE RIGHTS
GRANTED BELIEVERS BY SOVIET LAW. FOR INSTANCE, OFFI-
CIALS MAY TRY TO INTERFERE WITH THE RIGHT OF PARENTS
TO TAKE THEIR CHILDREN TO CHURCH. CITING THE TEXT OF
THE LAW, THEY CLAIMED, IS USUALLY SUFFICIENT TO RESOLVE
SUCH PROBLEMS AND TO CAUSE LOCAL OFFICIALS TO BACK DOWN.

5. EMBOFF MENTIONED ATTENDING RECENT ZNANIYE SOCIETY
LECTURE ON ATHEISM (SEE REFAIR) WHERE THE SPEAKER
CITED OBLIGATIONS OF THE USSR AS SIGNATORY OF HELSINKI
FINAL ACT; PORTRAYED SOVIET AUTHORITIES AS MODULATING

THEIR ANTI-RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES BECAUSE OF SENSITIVITY TO CRITICISM FROM ABROAD; AND COMPLAINED IN PARTICULAR ABOUT THE INEFFECTIVENESS OF ANTI-RELIGIOUS PROPAGANDA AMONG SOVIET BAPTISTS. BYCHKOV AND ZHIDKOV REACTED WITH AMUSEMENT AND COMMENTED THAT IT BEARS OUT THEIR FEELING THAT THE AUTHORITIES ARE NOT CURRENTLY INTERESTED IN CAUSING TROUBLE FOR BELIEVERS. AND IF HELSINKI IS A FACTOR, "THANK GOD FOR THAT."

6. BYCHKOV AND ZHIDKOV PROVED QUITE WILLING TO DISCUSS THE STATUS OF "ILLEGAL" BAPTIST CONGREGATIONS (THE SO-CALLED "INITSIATIVNIKI", WHO REFUSE TO OBEY SOVIET LAWS REGULATING ACTIVITIES OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS). IN THEIR OPINION, THE DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED BY THESE BAPTISTS ARE GRADUALLY BEING RESOLVED, BUT VERY SLOWLY. THEY ESTIMATE THE NUMBER OF SUCH CONGREGATIONS AT ABOUT 200, RATHER THAN THE 400 CLAIMED BY THE INITSIATIVNIKI. ABOUT 30 OF THESE GROUPS HAVE ALREADY
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PAGE 04 MOSCOW 20175 01 OF 02 281703Z

REGISTERED WITH THE AUTHORITIES. ASKED ABOUT THE ILLEGALLY PRINTED JOURNAL "VESTNIK ISTINY" (SEE REFTTEL) PUBLISHED BY THE "ILLEGAL" BAPTISTS, BYCHKOV AND ZHIDKOV ACKNOWLEDGED KNOWING ABOUT IT, BUT WERE OBVIOUSLY RELUCTANT TO PURSUE THE SUBJECT FURTHER.

7. WHEN ASKED ABOUT RELATIONS BETWEEN THE LEGAL AND ILLEGAL BAPTISTS, BYCHKOV AND ZHIDKOV STATED EMPHATICALLY THAT THEY, THE LEGAL BAPTISTS, "DO NOT TURN THEIR BACKS" ON THEIR BROTHERS. ON THE CONTRARY, THEY CONSIDER IMPRISONED DISSIDENT BAPTISTS AS TRUE "PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE" ("UZNIKI SOVESTI") AND PERIODICALLY INTERCEDE WITH THE AUTHORITIES ON THEIR BEHALF. THEY MAINTAIN BOTH ORGANIZTIONAL AND PERSONAL CONTACT WITH DISSIDENT BAPTISTS. IN AREAS, FOR EXAMPLE, WHERE CONGREGATIONS OF BOTH GROUPS EXIST IN PROXIMITY TO EACH OTHER, THEIR RELATIONS ARE OFTEN GOOD, INVOLVING SOCIAL CONTACTS AND EXCHANGE VISITS BY PASTORS TO EACH OTHER'S CONGREGATION. UNFORTUNATELY, NOTED BYCHKOV AND ZHIDKOV, SOME OF THE DISSIDENT BAPTISTS HAVE A "MARTYR COMPLEX" AND ARE EXCESSIVELY SUSPICIOUS, EVEN TO THE EXTENT OF CONSIDERING BAPTISTS WHO ABIDE BY THE LAW AS HAVING COMPROMISED THEIR PRINCIPLES, AND THEIR LEADERS AS AGENTS OF THE AUTHORITIES (BOTH LOOKED PAINED WHEN SAYING THIS).

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PAGE 01 MOSCOW 20175 02 OF 02 281726Z

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DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01

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R 281501Z DEC 76

FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2526

INFO AMEMBASSY BELGRADE

AMEMBASSY BERLIN

USMISSION USBERLIN UNN

AMEMBASSY BUCHAREST

AMEMBASSY BUDAPEST

AMCONSUL LENINGRAD

AMCONSUL MUNICH

USMISSION NATO

AMEMBASSY PRAGUE

AMEMBASSY SOFIA

AMEMBASSY WARSAW

USIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 MOSCOW 20175

8. GEORGIY VINS. AS AN EXAMPLE OF A BAPTIST WITH A MARTYR COMPLEX, THEY CITED GEORGIY VINS. SOMEWHAT HEATEDLY, THEY COMPLAINED THAT VINS EVEN REFUSES TO SUBMIT A REQUEST TO THE AUTHORITIES FOR A REVIEW OF HIS CASE. THEY CLAIMED (WITH A LACK OF CHARITY, IT WOULD SEEM) THAT VINS IS ADAMANT BECAUSE IF HE WERE TO MAKE SUCH A REQUEST, HE WOULD LOSE "ONE HALF OF HIS INFLUENCE AMONG HIS PEOPLE." VINS, THEY EMPHASIZED, IS NOT THE ONLY ONE IMPRISONED FOR HIS CONVICTIONS; THERE ARE ABOUT 40 BAPTIST "PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE," AND ALL OF THEM ARE DESERVING OF PRAYER AND HELP. HOWEVER, BYCHKOV AND ZHIDKOV COMPLAINED, WHEN THEY WERE TRAVELING IN THE U.S. RECENTLY, ALL THEY COULD HEAR

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PAGE 02 MOSCOW 20175 02 OF 02 281726Z

WAS "VINS, VINS, VINS."

9. ON THE AVAILABILITY OF BIBLES. BYCHKOV AND ZHIDKOV

CITED THE QUESTION OF IMPORTING BIBLES AND OF PUBLISHING THEM IN THE USSR AS ONE AREA WHERE THERE HAS BEEN SIGNIFICANT MOVEMENT, WITH MORE EXPECTED. WHEN FOREIGNERS TRY TO SMUGGLE BIBLES INTO THE COUNTRY, THEY NOTED, THESE GET CONFISCATED AND AUTHORITIES BECOME UPSET. YET WHEN THE OFFICIAL BAPTISTS RAISED THE QUESTION OF IMPORTING BIBLES WITH THE STATE COMMITTEE FOR RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS, THEY RECEIVED PERMISSION ALMOST AT ONCE, AND HAVE ALREADY IMPORTED SEVERAL THOUSAND IN BOTH GERMAN LANGUAGE AND RUSSIAN EDITIONS. THEY EXPECT TO BE RECEIVING ADDITIONAL SHIPMENTS AND ARE IN CONTACT WITH THE INTERNATIONAL BIBLE SOCIETY ON THE SUBJECT. IN ADDITION, THE ORTHODOX CHURCH HAS ALREADY PUBLISHED A NEW EDITION OF THE BIBLE, AS WELL AS A 70,000-COPY EDITION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT. ZHIDKOV PULLED OUT A COPY OF THE LATTER (OUT OF A SAFE) AND SAID THAT THE ORTHODOX CHURCH LET THE BAPTISTS HAVE 3,000 COPIES. THE BAPTISTS ARE ALSO WORKING ON THEIR OWN EDITION OF THE BIBLE.

10. ON HAVING A "REAL BAPTIST" IN THE WHITE HOUSE. ACCORDING TO BYCHKOV AND ZHIDKOV, BAPTISTS IN MOSCOW ARE ALREADY LOOKING FORWARD TO THE DAY WHEN THEY WILL RECEIVE "THEIR BROTHER" PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER IN THE MOSCOW BAPTIST CHURCH. THE HOPE THAT THE CONCERN OF A BAPTIST PRESIDENT FOR HIS CORELIGIONISTS IN THE SOVIET UNION--AND THE READINESS OF SOVIET AUTHORITIES TO TAKE THIS FACT INTO ACCOUNT--WILL MATERIALLY IMPROVE THE STATUS OF BAPTISTS IN PARTICULAR AND BROADEN THE LIMITS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN GENERAL, SHONE THROUGH THE CAUTIOUS DISCUSSION OF THIS SUBJECT BY BYCHKOV AND ZHIDKOV. THEY EXHIBITED WITH PRIDE ENGRAVED WHITE HOUSE INVITATIONS THEY HAD RECEIVED TO ATTEND

CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 03 MOSCOW 20175 02 OF 02 281726Z

A PRAYER BREAKFAST ON JAN 25 FROM "PRESIDENT AND MRS. JIMMY CARTER." THEY WERE ALREADY WORRYING THAT THE AMERICAN EMBASSY MIGHT BE SLOW IN ISSUING VISAS, AND IMPORED EMBOFF TO SEE WHETHER THESE COULD BE ISSUED EARLY, TO AVOID THE POSSIBILITY OF UNEXPECTED DELAYS. EMBOFF ASSURED THEM THAT THE EMBASSY WOULD DO ALL IT COULD TO ASSIST.

1. COMMENT. THE MESSAGE BYCHKOV AND ZHIDKOV SOUGHT TO CONVEY WAS THAT THE BEST WAY TO HANDLE THE AUTHORITIES IN MATTERS OF RELIGION IS BY TAKING A LOW-KEY, BUSINESS-LIKE APPROACH, OF OBEYING THE LAW, AND OF INSISTING THAT THE AUTHORITIES OBEY IT, TOO. BUT THEY ALSO CONVEYED THEIR AWARENESS THAT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BELIEVERS AND AUTHORITIES IS NOT AN EQUAL ONE AND THAT

THEY ARE AT A DISADVANTAGE IN ARGUING POINTS OF LAW WITH AN ALL-POWERFUL BUREAUCRACY. HENCE, THEY LOOK WITH HOPE TO THE BENEFICENT EFFECTS OF THE HENSINKI FINAL ACT AND--NOW--TO THE PROSPECT OF HAVING A "REAL BAPTIST" IN THE WHITE HOUSE AS FACTORS LIKELY TO MODULATE SOVIET ATTITUDES TOWARD RELIGION. WE ALSO FIND INTERESTING THEIR ACCOUNT OF THE RELATIONS EXISTING BETWEEN "LEGAL" AND "ILLEGAL" BAPTISTS, A SUBJECT ON WHICH WE HAVE HAD LITTLE INFORMATION.

12. BYCHKOV AND ZHIDKOV WERE OBVIOUSLY DELIGHTED TO HAVE EMBOFF CALL ON THEM, REPEATEDLY ASKED HIM TO MAKE SUCH VISITS A REGULAR OCCURRENCE, AND INVITED HIM TO ATTEND A BAPTIST SERVICE IN THEIR CHURCH. AFTER CONVERSATION, THEY GAVE EMBOFF A TOUR OF THE BUILDING HOUSING BOTH THE BAPTIST HEADQUARTERS AND THE CHURCH ITSELF. THE PLACE WAS A BEEHIVE OF ACTIVITY. ZHIDKOV EXPLAINED THAT THEY WERE PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS AND RECEIVING NUMEROUS DELEGATIONS FROM DISTANT BAPTIST CONGREGATIONS. IT APPEARS THAT BAPTISTS IN THE SOVIET UNION, LIKE THEIR BRETHREN ELSEWHERE, ARE SELF-STARTERS, AND THE VITALITY OF THE PLACE WAS IMPRESSIVE.

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PAGE 04 MOSCOW 20175 02 OF 02 281726Z

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